

## World

NICARAGUA

# The Contras' Revived Challenge

*With arsenals replenished, they threaten to expand the war*

**A**fter months of lying low, Nicaragua's *contra* rebels are on the attack once more. Last week, in action more vigorous than any seen in a year, the guerrillas staged a quick series of assaults that were bound to alarm the country's Sandinista rulers. Outside the village of La Palmita, 80 miles north of Managua, the capital, the rebels ambushed a military convoy, killing 29 government soldiers. Over the next two days, on the outskirts of the northwestern city of Esteli (pop. 75,000), they damaged two bridges on Nicaragua's main artery, part of the north-south Pan-

the infiltrators have penetrated a loose cordon of Sandinista troops trying to keep the *contras* from launching deep-ranging attacks.

The *contras* no longer seem to be suffering from the severe shortages of equipment and ammunition that plagued them after the U.S. withheld funding for the rebels (Congress eventually allocated \$27 million last June for "humanitarian" assistance). Contributions, FDN leaders say, have flooded in from several Latin American countries, as well as from Western Europe and Asia. "If we take the war into

lar uprising . . . They haven't done the political organizing."

Moreover, the insurgents continue to face a well-equipped 60,000-man Sandinista army, backed by a dozen Soviet-supplied Mi-24 helicopter gunships, which were used for the first time in battle last week around La Trinidad. Finally, a number of the new peasant recruits in *contra* ranks have very limited training and no combat experience. Nonetheless, the insurgents have improved their positions significantly since last winter. Not only were they desperately short of supplies then, but the Nicaraguan army was pushing them back toward the Honduran border. That Sandinista advance brought the rebel base camps under sporadic artillery and rocket fire. Besides facing congressional opposition in Washington, the



Rebels air-dropping supplies over Nicaragua from vintage DC-3



Guerrillas receiving orders at base camp inside Honduras

American Highway. Then in midweek they staged their most ambitious raid this year. Shortly after daybreak, several hundred insurgents swarmed into La Trinidad, a small town near Esteli. For three hours they shelled a military barracks and battled government troops; at least 33 *contras* and eight militiamen were killed. Before withdrawing, the rebels set fire to government grain silos and food-storage sheds. In Esteli the government radio station broadcast messages calling for reservists to report for possible duty.

For the first time in their four-year campaign, the *contras* claim that they are strong enough to pose a credible threat to the Sandinista government. Their numbers continue to swell, with support coming in particular from poor Nicaraguan campesinos. The Nicaraguan army has attempted to keep the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the main *contra* group, bottled up along the 550-mile border with Honduras. But the rebels claim that since late June they have infiltrated 14,000 guerrillas, operating under 13 regional commands, into Nicaragua, and that 53,000 more are awaiting training and outfitting on the country's borders. Moving along slippery paths in heavy jungle,

the cities," FDN Commander in Chief Enrique Bermúdez told TIME in a rare interview, "we shall destroy the evil regime like an earthquake."

The response from Managua to last week's rebel probes was to divert attention from the clashes around Esteli with the familiar warnings of an impending U.S. invasion. The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry placed the armed forces on maximum alert. But sources close to the government said that while officials were "worried" about the escalation of rebel activity in the northern part of the country, the *contras* don't yet "pose a real threat to toppling the government, even if they are very efficient at creating chaos."

Some U.S. analysts agree. Having watched the ebb and flow of the insurgent challenge since 1981, they point out that the rebels have not won a major military victory in three years, and have yet to establish firm control over any strategic part of Nicaragua. Plans for moving against the cities and the densely populated plain along the Pacific coast, says Robert Leiken of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, are unrealistic because the *contras* "have not created the political conditions for any kind of popu-

*contras* were forced by Honduras, which was reluctant to become more deeply involved in the Nicaraguan civil war, to abandon temporarily some of their bases along the frontier. At the same time, the Nicaraguan army moved thousands of peasants out of the area south of the border, trying to create a free-fire zone and denying the *contras* access to food supplies.

Today rebel warehouses are brimming with equipment, ammunition and food. "During all of last year, we fought only with rifles and without any infantry-support weapons," Bermúdez told TIME. "Now we have machine guns, antitank weapons and grenade launchers." *Contra* leaders explain that they are receiving assistance from supporters in Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina. The FDN declines to identify the European and Asian contributors to its cause; between \$5 million and \$10 million in private aid has come from the U.S. Since 1983 the Honduran army reportedly has made available military stocks left behind by U.S. troops following annual joint maneuvers.

A recent look at a 400-man rebel column as it marched toward infiltration points into Nicaragua along the

Rio Coco found the guerrillas well equipped with automatic rifles, mostly Soviet-designed AK-47s but also a sprinkling of Belgian FNs and West German G3s. The troops wore khaki or camouflage uniforms and new combat boots. Each fighter's battle gear included two canteens, a medical kit, a commando knife and pouches filled with clean-loaded clips for their weapons and four grenades. Some carried backpacks stuffed with ammunition destined for units already operating in Nicaragua.

Morale among the *contras* appears to be high. A rebel troop leader who calls himself Kaliman, a former Sandinista officer until his desertion in 1980, explains his enthusiasm for battle by declaring that "Nicaragua is not a free country and its people are not free." Heading back into the Nicaraguan countryside after a resupply mission, Kaliman claims that "no-



Contra with SA-7 ground-to-air missile

body tell me where to attack or fight. We pick our own targets and choose our own time."

The rebels claim to be faring better now than in the early period of the insurgency, when they were funded, trained and advised by Central Intelligence Agency operatives. "We never got explosives, for instance," says Bermúdez, "because the CIA did not want us to blow up strategic targets in Nicaragua. Now we are free to select our own targets." The attack on the bridges near Esteli last week may be the beginning of what Bermúdez describes as a campaign to cause a "real crisis" for the Sandinistas by striking against highways and power lines.

Bermúdez seems fatalistic about any ill will such raids might breed among a population already suffering from shortages of food and consumer goods, the result, among other things, of Sandinista economic and planning policies. "We have learned the hard way that good guys do not win wars," he says.

What the FDN does miss about its old CIA connection is air support. The rebel air force consists of five World War II-vintage transports that Bermúdez says "belong in a museum." The planes fly fre-

quent supply-drop missions for units operating inside Nicaragua; during the last week of July, rebel leaders say, the aircraft ferried 35 tons of ammunition and food to the 5,500 *contras* said to be roaming the central mountain areas.

Bermúdez and his colleagues worry far less about manpower. They claim that 75% to 80% of the peasant population, increasingly discontent with Sandinista rule, is on the insurgents' side. Such sweeping generalizations are almost impossible to prove, but growing discontent does give the *contras* many advantages they did not have a year ago. About 5% of new *contra* recruits are women; the ages of volunteers range roughly from 17 to 35.

While the recruits are primarily campesinos, the leaders of the rebels' regional commands and task forces remain a mixed group. Of 74 commanders, 20, including Bermúdez, a former colonel,



served in the late dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle's hated national guard; 36 others are deserters from the Sandinista cause. Most keep their real identities secret, operating only under code names. Commander Quiche, 26, who served as a sergeant in the Somoza national guard, is now considered one of the rebels' top field officers and heads their largest command, a force of 5,500. Quiche's family does not know of his current occupation. The last time he saw his father and brothers, he says, "they told me a long story of a comandante operating in their area, and they asked me to join him. The only trouble I had was that they were talking about my own forces."

*Contra* leaders speak optimistically of changing the "military situation" within the next year. "We will push for the Pacific coastline and confront the Sandinista regime with a major military, economic and political crisis," says Bermúdez. "If we fail, it will prolong the war and will turn it into a war of attrition." But that may not be something the *contras* can afford. "We cannot keep a force of this size forever," says FDN Spokesman Frank Arana. In his view, it could be now or never for the *contras*.

—By Jill Smolowe.  
Reported by David Halevy with the *contras*

ISRAEL

## Cry for Revenge

*Right-wing pressure is growing*

When Israelis want to say "I'm no hayseed" or "I wasn't born yesterday," they use the phrase "I wasn't born in Afula." The reference is to a sleepy town of 23,000 that lies south of Lake Tiberias, the biblical Sea of Galilee. With its small stores and workshops and its disposable-diaper factory, Afula is an unlikely setting for an outpouring of political protest. But last week, as a crowd of 5,000 gathered to mourn the death of a local resident named Albert Bukhris, the town became a focal point of anti-Arab feelings aroused by the murder of 17 Israelis over the past 15 months.

Bukhris, 32, had been shot and killed in the West Bank town of Nablus, where he operated a food kiosk, by the Syria-based Abu Mousa branch of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The group is hostile to Yasser Arafat's main-line P.L.O. Only two days before the shooting, Bukhris had been detained briefly in Afula for taking part in a protest following the murders of two Israeli schoolteachers, allegedly by three Arab youths. At both this and the demonstration over Bukhris' death, police clashed with the angry followers of Rabbi Meir Kahane as the protesters shouted, "Kill the murderers of Jews!" and "Death to the terrorists!" Kahane, head of the ultraright Kach Party and the founder of the Jewish Defense League in the U.S., was prevented by police from attending Bukhris' funeral.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres' national unity government is under pressure, especially from the extreme right, to take a tougher line on Arab terrorism. Kahane, who advocates expulsion of all Arabs from Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, is gaining popularity, as is Tehiya, a small, right-wing party. A poll printed at week's end by the daily newspaper *Ma'ariv* showed that if elections were held today, Kahane's Kach Party would increase its seats in the Knesset from one to five, while Tehiya would go from five to nine. Kahane, whose anti-Arab views strike a responsive chord in many working-class Sephardic Jews from Muslim countries, is openly contemptuous of democracy.

Meanwhile, the government is also being criticized for the continuing unrest along its northern border with Lebanon. A suicide car bomber drove into an Israeli armored patrol in southern Lebanon last week, wounding two Israelis and killing one Lebanese civilian. Israel quickly retaliated with an air strike on the headquarters of a radical Lebanese group that has claimed responsibility for seven car-bomb attacks on Israeli positions. Peres is said to be ready to adopt stronger antiterrorist measures. "There is no place for incitement and hysteria," Peres said. But, he promised, "there will be no compromise" when it comes to sabotage and terrorism. ■